

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

FILE

DATE

6-7-88

FILE

DOC NO

EA M 88-20078

OIR

3

P & PD

1

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

26 May 1988

South Korea: Reaction to a Proposed US Troop Reduction

25X1

Summary

A proposal to reduce US ground forces in South Korea would exacerbate long-held doubts about US reliability, despite the desire of most Koreans to assume greater responsibility in the security relationship. With a new leadership and a more open political environment, such a proposal is likely to trigger wide-ranging debate about South Korea's strategic, economic, and diplomatic objectives, particularly regarding the North. If the debate complicates President Roh Tae Woo's effort to build a consensus behind his political reform program and to establish effective working relations with his opponents, it could change the behavior of key ruling camp actors, such as the military. For instance, the military could argue for a tough line toward domestic opposition, as well as a go-it-alone defense buildup, possibly including nuclear and chemical weapons.

25X1

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 25 May 1988 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Korea, Northeast Asia Division, OEA, [redacted]

25X1

25X1

EA M 88-20078

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

Ambivalence Toward the Status Quo

Although an announcement of US ground force withdrawals would represent a major shock to the Koreans, attitudes and opinions in South Korea about the US relationship have changed considerably since the late 1970s, when the issue last arose. Indeed, support for the status quo has been declining:

- Heightened national pride and a desire for a more independent international image have reinforced the opinion of many South Koreans that they can handle the threat from P'yongyang. [redacted] senior military officers are confident of reaching parity with the North in the mid-1990s, assuming US air and logistic support is ensured. [redacted] some long-term defense thinking no longer includes the assumption that South Korea will host a significant US presence indefinitely. 25X1 25X1 25X1
- Many in the ruling camp, as well as opposition groups, are demanding an equal relationship, including security ties. They view the current security arrangement--with a US general in charge of the joint command structure--as an embarrassment. [redacted] 25X1

Nonetheless, [redacted] some senior officials indicate South Koreans are ambivalent about changing an arrangement that has served them well since the Korean war. In our view, South Koreans, at this point, do not appear to have reconciled a desire for more authority with apprehensions about a diminished US presence. We have found no evidence that they have realistically considered the sort of security arrangement they want for the future--or how to achieve it--while maintaining credible deterrence. [redacted] 25X1

Spurring Broader Questions

Any step to reduce the US troop presence--even if preceded by negotiations to modify the security relationship--would be certain to precipitate wide public debate about South Korea's economic, diplomatic, and strategic objectives and priorities in the 1990s.

At the political level, a decision to sharply reduce or withdraw US forces would heighten South Koreans' long-held suspicions and anxieties about US motives and reliability. To the Koreans, the history of bilateral relations carries clear messages about the risks in US policy shifts:

25X1

25X1

- Every Korean schoolchild learns of previous US "abandonment" of Korea--beginning with the 1905 Taft-Katsura Agreement, in which Washington voided the mutual guarantees of the 1882 US-Korean Treaty of Friendship and agreed to Japanese control of Korea.
- Even as Koreans express gratitude for US support during the Korean war, they point to the withdrawal of US troops in 1948-49 as encouraging North Korea to attack. US disengagement from Vietnam, the Nixon Doctrine, and the Carter administration's troop reduction plan have buttressed concern about Washington's ambivalence toward military commitments in Asia.
- In the 1980s, academic treatments of the bilateral Korea relationship and student rhetoric suggest many young Koreans are convinced that US Korea policy is based on a cynical calculation of strategic and economic self-interest--a perception reinforced by US initiatives to open South Korean markets that have led to the recent rise in trade frictions.¹

25X1

For most Koreans, uncertainty about Washington's commitment makes forward-positioned US ground forces the cornerstone of South Korea's national security. Despite the steady improvement in their military capabilities, senior military and government officials also regard the presence of these forces as the deterrent to a North Korean attack. Public opinion polls indicate that even among university students, notwithstanding their frequently tough attacks on US policy, fewer than 15 percent support an outright withdrawal of US forces. Despite their rhetoric, the opposition parties, human rights activists, and most other antigovernment groups likewise see the US troop presence as necessary not only for deterrence but also as a shield behind which democracy can develop.

25X1

At the policy level, withdrawal would precipitate several related concerns. **For Seoul, the most sensitive policy choices involve South Korea's military and diplomatic posture toward the North.** Reducing US troops or turning operational command of ground forces over to the South Koreans would be likely to trigger divisive debate over whether to improve South Korea's own military capabilities, or seek genuine steps to reduce tensions with P'yongyang. We do not believe an official muzzle could be easily clamped on such a dialogue. With the media and the opposition camp demanding that the government remove restrictions on public discussion of rapprochement with the North, even the ruling party would need to publicly endorse bringing the subject into the open. Moreover, P'yongyang would complicate the issue by pressing Seoul hard to negotiate before it was ready.

25X1

25X1

25X1

25X1

[REDACTED]

Domestic political pressure could put the strategic role of US air and naval elements in South Korea on the negotiating table. Changes in the security relationship, for example, could open the door to public demands for new US basing rights agreements that include nonnuclear provisions. With antinuclear sentiment surfacing, South Koreans could see a continuing strategic role for US air and naval forces as making the South a high-priority Soviet target, at the same time that Seoul was losing the deterrent benefits of US ground troops. [REDACTED]

25X1

Security cooperation with Japan would become an issue. The South Koreans are certain to conclude that, as US reductions occur, budgetary considerations would lead Washington to supplement its regional defense role by seeking a greater security commitment from Japan. Seoul is certain to worry that Tokyo would not pull its own weight, or to distrust its motives if it did. [REDACTED]

25X1

A change in the security relationship also would affect other critical questions, including the issue of social versus defense spending. A US force reduction with compensatory increases in domestic defense spending would sharpen the debate over national economic priorities. Pressure against defense spending increases would strengthen as an opposition-dominated National Assembly enacted programs to achieve economic equity. South Korean economic planners anticipate the government would have to sharply increase social spending in coming years just to fulfill President Roh's promises for welfare and regional development programs. [REDACTED]

25X1

Given Seoul's more active diplomacy, change in the US security commitment increasingly would bear on South Korea's relations with the Soviet Union and China. Seoul would worry that a diminished US military profile could affect plans in the post-Olympics period to expand economic ties and eventually normalize diplomatic relations with Moscow and Beijing. An image of greater independence from the United States would remove some symbolic hurdles. But some South Koreans are likely to argue that it would encourage the Soviets and Chinese to attempt in their negotiations and propaganda to link progress on relations to concessions from Seoul regarding policy toward the North or strategic arrangements with the United States--for example, making the peninsula a nuclear-free zone. [REDACTED]

25X1

The Political Scene--Does It Matter?

Beyond the obvious historical baggage entailed in the troop withdrawal issue, as well as its importance to security and diplomatic policy, a change in the US security commitment could have unpleasant consequences for Roh's performance in South Korea's new political era. Having lost its parliamentary majority, the government will find it harder to manage the domestic political agenda and the public response to it. As discussion on security issues spilled over into the economic and political arena, for example, the government could find challenges to its programs across the board. The media are already making connections that could complicate economic negotiations with Washington. Some Korean commentators have speculated that US references to an eventual troop withdrawal are simply a bluff, designed to pressure South Korea to make trade concessions, as well as to increase its contribution to the combined defense improvement plan (CDIF) and pay more of the cost of joint exercises. [REDACTED]

25X1

25X1

[REDACTED]

A debate over security also could undermine Roh's efforts to solidify his own position and to develop a working relationship with his adversaries. We do not know how the troop reduction issue would play out within the ruling camp, particularly if the broader debate became intense. Most obviously, political hardliners, including the Army, could press Roh to take a tougher line in dealing with the opposition and with radicals. The military also could argue for a go-it-alone defense buildup in light of their renewed questions about US support. The South Koreans have the technical capabilities to develop nuclear and chemical weapons, and they could consider pursuing these options as part of an independent defense program. [REDACTED]

25X1

The Military Balance

At present the military balance between the forces of the two Koreas favors the North, and we expect P'yongyang will retain a significant edge in numbers of men under arms, firepower, and mobility over the next several years. We believe Seoul will take advantage of both its far greater economic strength and its technological edge to add more advanced equipment (F-16 fighters and "88" tanks, for example) that already is undercutting P'yongyang's quantitative advantages. The limited amounts of not quite state-of-the-art weapons the Soviets are providing the North have had little impact on the balance thus far. We expect Seoul probably will be strong enough to stand alone against the North by the mid-to-late 1990s. This could change, however, if the Soviets decide to provide sizable amounts of technology and advanced weapons, such as MIG-29s or T-72 tanks. In that event, the balance would stay in the North's favor and perhaps widen. [REDACTED]

25X1

SOUTH KOREA: REACTION TO PROPOSED US TROOP REDUCTION

25X1

DISTRIBUTION:

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

1 - DAVID SCHILLING, DIRECTOR FOR POLICY PLANNING

INTERNAL

1 - DIRECTOR, DCI/DDCI/EXECUTIVE STAFF, RM 7E12,
1 - NIO, EAST ASIA, RM 7E62,
1 - NIO, ECONOMICS, RM 7E47,
1 - CHIEF, EA, RM 5D26,
1 - CHIEF, OGI/FSIC/PI, RM 3G04,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/NEA/KOREA, RM 4G43,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/NEA/JAPAN, RM 4G31,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/NEA/STI, RM 4G43,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/NEA/DIVISION, RM 4G43,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/CHINA DIVISION, RM 4G20,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/SEA DIVISION, RM 4F24,
1 - DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF EAST ASIAN ANALYSIS, RM 4F18,
1 - CHIEF, OEA/PRODUCTION, RM 4G48,
1 - CHIEF, FBIS/NEAD/AB RM 1N07,
1 - DDI, RM 7E44,
1 - SENIOR REVIEW PANEL, RM 5G00,
1 - OCA REGISTRY, OFFICE OF CONGRESSIONAL AFFAIRS RM 7B24,
1 - PDB STAFF, RM 7F30,
1 - CHIEF, LDA/EAD/AB, RM 1H18,
6 - CONTROL BRANCH, OFFICE OF CURRENT PRODUCTION AND ANALYTIC
SUPPORT, RM 7G07,
1 - INTELL. SUPPORT STAFF, OFFICE OF CURRENT PRODUCTION AND ANALYTIC
SUPPORT, RM 7G50,
1 - INTELL. LIAISON STAFF, OFFICE OF CURRENT PRODUCTION AND ANALYTIC
SUPPORT, RM 7G50,
1 - CHIEF, PRODUCT EVALUATION STAFF, RM 2F42,
1 - CHIEF, DDO/EA DIVISION, RM 5D00,
1 - CHIEF, DDO/EA, RM 5C45,
1 - CHIEF, DDO/EA, RM 5C19,
1 - CHIEF, DDO/EA, RM 5C19,

25X1

25X1

25X1